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“ ‘More Production?’—Say, Where D’ya Get That Stuff?”

By WHITING WILLIAMS

“DEES fine cool job, Buddee. Go slow—take easy—mebbe make last all day.”

This exhortation came to me in a whisper from my worker friend, Lorenzo, after the labor-gang boss had called the two of us up out of the hot and sooty checker-chambers beneath the big open-hearth furnaces and had ordered us to throw the broken checker-brick out of the cool passageway on to a low car for hauling away to the dump.

Lorenzo was only nineteen, but he had been “common labor” long enough to absorb thoroughly the “philosophy of production” which I found on the mind of the unskilled, foreign-born worker throughout the seven months of 1919 which I spent sleeping with him in the same boarding-house bed, shivering with him outside the same factory gates, and working beside him in the same steel mills, coal mines, ship-yards, roundhouses, refineries, etc., in an attempt to learn for my company the causes of our industrial unrest.

At the present moment, certainly, few things are more pertinent than that we should know the nature of the particular thinkings and feelings about this matter of producing which happen to be operated by the worker himself. And “I’ll say,” to adopt his manner of speaking, that it is impossible to get any proper understanding of these by the use of a reporter’s pad and pencil. On the

job—that is where Lorenzo lives; that is where we must talk with him—while we warm our hands together around the salamander waiting for the half-frozen grease to melt, or down in the silent “room” by the glistening “face” of a seam of coal with our car well loaded, eating a bite out of our buckets as we wait for the mule-driver to bring in another “empty.” In such places, thanks partly to the good will shown in my partial use of several of their European languages, Lorenzo and Stephanos and Pietro and Alfonso and all my other buddies did their best to show me the ropes, even though they knew I must have made a fearful failure “som’ers” else or I wouldn’t have been with them—“No American stay long time labor gang—unless he ‘nuts’ or too much w’iskee.”

The full quota of their kindly instruction in the science of production as they see it in the labor gang was such as made me, in each plant, do less the longer I stayed—as I became better trained in what was just about the only instruction or propaganda in the place—the underground propaganda which is whispered from lip to ear as the old-timer with his shovel emptied passes in the line close to you with your shovel full:

“Ps’st! Buddee, Ps’st!—Take it easy. Don’t keel yourself! Lotsa time.”

Not a pleasant propaganda to think about in these days when all the world is fighting hard to save its life by increasing its slender store of peace-

time goods and lessening its superabundance of war-time money.

But if my months at "hard labor" meant anything at all, they meant this: Let him who would cast the first stone at Lorenzo or any other of my easy-going "buddies" follow his advice and go slow before letting fly.

In a very few weeks of work alongside of him the would-be caster would learn with what amazing naturalness that work-avoiding propaganda results from Lorenzo's surroundings on the job and off of it.

Particularly, off of it.

Probably the biggest thing which rubs out of Lorenzo's mind most of what the world tries to tell him about "more production" is the trouble he has—usually—to *get on the job*.

PROLONGED PRODUCTION A RESULT OF JOB SCARCITY

At this particular moment in 1920, it may not be hard for him to find a job, but last winter and much of last summer the country was talking about more production just as much as now. Nevertheless, at that time—when war orders had been cancelled and peace orders were coquetting in hopes of lower prices—I know that in many parts of the country it was almost impossible for thousands of Lorenzos to find work. And it wasn't a pleasant thing for him or for me to know either.

"Not a job in the house. No, nothing at all," was the way the clerk in the government employment office kept answering—like a phonograph—all of us applicants in a voice purposely loud enough to reach every one of the room full of negroes and foreigners. "Not a thing, I tell you. The ——— Company laid off three thousand

yesterday and the ——— Company five hundred this morning.—No, sir, as I just said, there ain't a job in the house—unless you're 'skilled,' then you can try across the hall."

Almost hourly my twenty-five dollars was growing smaller. I had vowed that when it was gone I'd become a bum along with the rest of them if no job turned up. Hour after hour, I shivered at plant gates with fifty or seventy-five others in the hope that one or two workers might be sick or tired and so give one or two of us a chance at their jobs in the labor gang just for the day—always in vain. It made it mighty nasty business to pass by a bunch of homeless and cashless fellow-shiverers trying to warm themselves at a fire of ties by the railroad track while I fingered my money and wondered how long I could side-step joining them.

Even among the shiverers at the gates or in the employment offices there was surprisingly little talk about Karl Marx and his idea that the world could not possibly consume all it could produce, with the consequent necessity of frequent long, desperate, hungry loafing periods. But I did hear Democrats and Republicans and every other conceivable group cursed from the bottom of men's hearts for permitting it to come about that in a world which everybody knew needed goods, men had to go hungry—and see their wives and kids go hungry—because willing muscles could get no chance to produce.

"Look at them hands! Say, ain't them good enough to make a livin' for my family, huh? But by G—I've been all over this ——— town fer a fortnight and I can't find no job

no'wures! Ain't that a hell of a country now, huh?"

All the time there may have been plenty of jobs somewhere nearby if only we could have found them. But as long as some of the biggest employers would not use the government employment offices and not all would advertise, there was nothing for it except to wander around until we stumbled—with the help of many questions in this or that saloon—on to one. No one knows the awful, the heart-sick length of even one single day when it is spent in trudgings—to save carfare—and questionings (with assurances on all sides that, "Yes, it's going to be a hell of a hard winter, all right, all right!") and applyings—all followed by turndowns and these in turn by fearings about how soon the breadline and the station-house floor and the fire by the railroad will be the only things left.

Meanwhile any effort to cover more territory by using the telephone is sure to be frowned upon—"Better be here yourself and make sure."

"More production? Humph! More hell!"

In many districts visited throughout the country all the hiring of rough labor is done at the plant gates at only two hours during the day, with, furthermore, these two hours so nearly the same at all plants that often times a fellow can make only two gates during the entire day. Still, further, whenever I tried to learn from the plant policeman or the hiring clerk where I stood the best chance, I nearly always got the same answer:

"Well, now, about tomorrow—I can't say. But you be sure to be here. Don't fail."

The bar-keep or customers could be counted on, usually, for a pretty good opinion as to the relative chances, but even at that it was usually a case of waiting an hour or so after the announced hiring hour and then getting little more than a pointed and final, "No! Not a thing!"—without, usually, even a single "Sorry" to edge it.

Many of these guards and clerks must some time have been out of a job and so have felt the dejection and the loss of self-respect which even the lowest men feel when separated from both a job and a "roll." But at most of the gates the effect was to "rub it in" that the time of the jobless man is worthless to himself and to everybody else; and the strain upon his self-respect makes him a poorer worker.

The morale of a young chap of dapper appearance, who had waited vainly for a month twice every day without any offering in his line, a skilled one, was manifestly slipping daily from his long mixing with a great crowd of fifty or sixty unskilled men, in what was called the "Bull Pen." Even if he never became a "casual" or a hobo, the company that hired him would pay for his lessened interest in producing.

"But I'm d——d sure o' one thing," he concluded his cursings as we walked away, "you won't catch me workin' myself to death when I do get in."

After so much trouble getting on to the job, the next thing Lorenzo and the rest of us had to worry about in the labor gang—it is not so much the case with the skilled worker—was the easy-going ways so many of our foremen and bosses had of putting us off of it again.

On many kinds of work experience teaches the laborer to fear each day's quitting time because it often brings that distressing verdict which starts him out again on the circuit of the gates:

"Here y' are, Joe! This'll get you your time. Won't need you in the morning!"

The more "Joe" (Lorenzo is seldom called by his right name) is exhorted to be a thrifty citizen and think about his future, the oftener he whispers as you bend together to push the five-hundred pound barrel of pitch over the gravel:

"Say, Buddee, what you tink?—Dees job he last long time? Mebbe yes, mebbe no? W'at say?"

Seldom it is that his buddy ever knows the answer, but experience teaches the wisdom of playing safe and stringing it out at as slow a pace as the boss will stand for:

"Go easy—mebbe make last all week"—(or all month or all year).

Even foremen—paid though they are to look after the interests of the company—sometimes cannot forget their days in the gang far enough to fail to have an eye out for their own and their fellow-foremen's interests by seeing to it that the work is not used up too fast.

"My G—," one of them exclaimed to his assistant as he saw that it was three-thirty in the morning, over two hours from quitting time. "Say, if we do any more on this the day foreman won't have anything to do. To hell with it, let's hit the hay!"

Needless to say, that particular kind of foreman—or at least the gang-boss under him—isn't going to worry himself too much about production and

deny himself the pleasure of putting a producer or two off the job if he can thereby manifest his authority, or perhaps reveal the innate sensitiveness of his temperament and disposition.

"Hey dere! Doan' you hear me tell you pick 'em up dose brick by hand? What? Why, G— d— you, if you doan' like dees job you know d— well what you can do!— What's dat? Say, you go get your time! Yes, right now! We doan' need you 'round here."

Not that all gang-bosses are like that, though I will say that many of them do seem to cultivate temperaments just as if they were artists—which they aren't. Often, too, it must be said for them, their temperaments come from having larger responsibilities than any man can handle and be happy. But especially where the worker is foreign-born, very unskilled, and on ten or twelve hour turns, there are too many of this type. Wherever they are, they help to give this same idea:

"More production? Say, Charlie, w'ere you get dat stuff? To hell wid it. Take easy!"

And the same query and injunction follow close after this or that boss or other representative of the stockholders shrugs his shoulders helplessly or uninterestedly when asked for a shovel with a usable handle or for a reamer that holds its cutting tool; or when he passes by and lets everybody sweat and swear in vain while the work of four men stops because the millwright won't furnish a guide to keep the steel sheets in place on the pile. The stopping lessens the earnings of two and increases the fatigue of all

four, besides lessening their belief in the management's interest in getting out the stuff.

Down in the coal mine I did my best one day to help my instructor make a record. Incidentally, I know of mighty few things that ever gave me more satisfaction than did his enthusiasm over my skill and endurance in handling my shovel and getting the coal into the cars. But it was all spoiled by the car that ran off the track and took two solid hours of pushing and jacking and lifting and crow-barring. The disappointment made me want to swear most profanely. But he was hardened to it—it seemed to be the regular thing:

"Ah've asked mony and mony's the toime for iron in place o' these wooden rails. But 'tis often and often this happens, so don't ye moind too much, me la'ad."

If a worker whose income depends pretty largely on the service the management gives him through the track-layers, the machine-men who undercut his coal so that his powder charge will find it "off its feet" and so ready to fall away to the floor, the shot-firers who set off the charge and others—if *he* can take such disappointments easily, then the man who works by the day can be pardoned if he doesn't bother as much as he would if he could get more evidence that maximum output was worrying more people.

But even the piece-rate or tonnage man feels a certain bounden and unselfish duty to his fellows not to do too much as long as workers and work are in such uncertain and dangerous unevenness as all these things indicate to him.

"I believe in doin' a good day's turn," said my eighteen-year-old "catcher" who was making his ten dollars a day—as his helper I drew only four dollars because I was on time and not tonnage. "But believe me, I ain't a-goin' to be none o' your G—d——d hogs for either the work or the money."

"These d——d Greeks—the way they work themselves and their crew by grabbin' up all the sheets in sight!—Why, 'tain't hardly honest!—and yet here's the company a-puttin' 'em in ahead of us Americans."

Of course, even more definite than this fear of the work's running out before it gets fairly around the group, is the fear that speeding up and earning beyond what the management may feel a proper day's income, will bring a cutting of the rate—which will mean a harder day's effort for the same or less pay. Every such cut indicates to the worker, quite naturally, that the management is not so very seriously interested in maximum daily production.

It is this deep-down feeling that every worker has an inalienable right to some kind of a job that is behind much of the pressure for shorter hours.

"Yes," shouts the organizer at the Sunday afternoon meeting, "with men outa jobs all over the country we're goin' to go after eight hours in steel. And when we get eight hours, we're goin' after seven—if there's still men outa work."

The company is getting the comeback from this same feeling when it is given what is about the highest praise a worker can give:

"You bet, this company's blamed good for havin' work when any com-

pany has work at all and for spreadin' what work they is around so that everybody gets his share and no hoggin'. Yes, I'll say it's a great old company to work for."

It makes it look as though we people who live on salary don't get much idea of what is the most important item of all in the mind of the chap working for wages—the steadiness of his daily job.

It is true that the worker has the preferred position over the capitalist because he gets his dividends on the investment of his labor before the capitalist does—and that is an advantage which many workers do not appreciate. On the other hand, by closing down this or that department when orders are shy, when engines need fixing, or for a host of other reasons, the claims of labor may be completely side-stepped for the period, whereas capital continues to run its bill; it may have to wait and take a chance for the bill's payment, but the charge goes on and into the bill to be met some day. And every day's close-down spells the same old thing to the chaps working with the shovel and even those with the drill press.

"I'll say, Charlie, consumption'll have to have a pill or two to liven 'er up some or you and me's goin' to be out of a job—and then where'll the wife and kids be, huh?—Better go slow."

"Why only seven cars today, Andy?" called one voice beneath the lamp in a visor as we came racing down the main butt of the mine behind a galloping mule one Saturday afternoon.

"If take all damn fool coal out today," said Andy, with a glistening set of smiling teeth showing through the dark, "no can work next week."

Just that is at the bottom of the trouble in coal—there are so many mines and so many miners that if all of them worked all the time or a year they'd all be out of work for the most of the following year. And with the mine itself closed down so many days for lack of cars or orders or this or that, it is hard to get the miners to feel that they're not also entitled to go easy on the days when their maximum effort happens to be desired, seeing that the result may be "no can work next week."

So it seems to me that Lorenzo's whisper to go slow starts a lot of things, because it is the result of a lot of them. But, altogether, it looks to me as though the root of the matter lies in the steady job—that his willingness to do his utmost daily can hardly be rightly judged until the manager in whom he has the fullest confidence can contrive to tell him—as some employers are now telling him:

"We've got things fixed now so you can go the limit and if we break down or anything happens that we should have prevented, you fellows should worry—we go on with your wages—from now on nobody around here is going to be able to 'produce' himself out of a job."

The coal matter will not be fixed up properly until something like that is said to the miners even though saying it will take a lot more serious study of coal than a commission to fix wages and hours. Neither will any other line of industrial production be properly fixed until something like that is done—following a much more serious study of all the factors than any agreement as to wages and hours or even any nation-wide plan for the adjustment of superficial grievances.

I believe that what Lorenzo wants most is a steady job. It would seem as though we could all get together on that, for every manager and every capitalist I know will say that he, too, wants nothing better than a chance to give him a steady job as the result of the factory's steady operation. When these three investors of "brawn, brain, and bullion" sit down to talk about steady operation as the real down-to-the-ground essential of more production, they will probably ask us customers to sit in with them and shoulder our share of the responsibility. Those of us who insist on ordering left-handed plows may be asked to get them all of one maker so the others won't have to bother to turn out just a few. Our wives may be asked—will it be in vain?—to lessen the extremes of their styles which now over-work thousands for a short season and out-of-work them for a long one. We men may have to agree to lessen our choice of patterns so the woolen mills can give their full time to them. All of us will be asked to regularize our orders so as to regularize operation so as to regularize the job for workers who, I fully believe from observation, take more pleasure in going hard than in "taking easy," and who will give themselves the pleasure—with the satisfied self-respect—which goes with good work, if they can be *sure* of a *steady* chance at that pleasure.

Something like that kind of teamwork between all of us is about the only kind of counter-propaganda which can be expected to break down the pernicious "Lotsa time" propaganda. The pernicious type is founded on fear—fear which results from the every-day experience of men who think

little but observe much, fear which is not allayed by the economist's calm assurance that in the course of a generation or so everything will work out nicely.

But the employer isn't the only one to blame for this fear, by a long shot. The public makes the wise manager fear that he, too, may produce himself out of his position by piling up goods which a fickle consumer may leave on his hands because the styles changed over night. The wise capitalist has to fear that his "over-head" may eat up his legitimate reward if he banks too much upon a steady demand and so lifts all the risk off from his workers and puts it into his inventory. The public, if it is wise, will do its fearing when any of these three is seen to be "going easy," because fear is probably at the bottom of it and fear is sure to result from it—fear of higher prices for the consumer and fear for daily bread for the producer.

All of which is about as far as possible from our present highly popular indoor sport of trying to get things done in time to save the world from bankruptcy by sitting down and saying:

"Take it easy—what can *we* do as long as the *other* fellow is soldiering, or profiteering, or Bolshevizing"—etc., etc.

After my seven months—and my other years—"I'll say" we're all, from top to lowest bottom and back again—including the other fellow—a bunch of fine chaps—all trying to play the game pretty fairly as we understand it. If we'd only try harder to get acquainted, we'd start a counter propaganda of confidence that would turn out the stuff and make us all happy again.